

OPERATIONS OF THE  
SECOND BULGARIAN ARMY  
IN 1915.

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INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH STUDY

OPERATIONS OF THE SECOND

BULGARIAN ARMY

IN 1915

Submitted by

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The Command and General Staff School  
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Fort Leavenworth, Kansas,

March 23, 1934.

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Director, Second Year Class,  
The Command and General Staff School,  
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

SUBJECT: THE OPERATIONS OF THE SECOND BULGARIAN  
ARMY IN 1913.

A preliminary investigation of the source material available on this subject indicated that it was markedly deficient both in quantity and focus. In addition some of the most valuable accounts available were in, as yet, untranslated Austrian, German and French.

It was felt that a research under these conditions and in the time available, could not result in a presentation which would achieve the completeness and exactitude desirable either from the viewpoint of the School or the student. However, a discussion of the situation with Lieut. Colonel Lane indicated that even an examination of the subject which was only preliminary to a final consideration, could have sufficient value to warrant the investigation, and caused its selection.

I have translated the pertinent portions of French sources. The Austro-German sources, except for maps, are still untranslated and offer future valuable returns.

## PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY.

While the title indicates that the subject of this study is the Operations of the Second Bulgarian Army in 1915, the purpose may be expressed more clearly as an investigation of the operations of a semi-independent military force approximating in strength a war-time United States Corps.

This "Army" at its maximum consisted of approximately four infantry divisions and one cavalry division. These divisions appear to have been somewhat smaller (estimate 18,000) than our division. The principal differences were in artillery strength and corps troops.

(1) The total Bulgarian forces in 1915 consisted of 36 regiments (first line) of 4 battalions each, with reserves of equal strength, and 10 regiments of cavalry.

The artillery for the total force was limited to 9 regiments (4 batteries of 4 guns each), 24 mountain batteries and 6 battalions of "fortress artillery."

There were in addition, pioneer troops, railway troops, ponton battalions, telegraph battalions and other technical units.

The relative proportion of artillery is obviously small and was limited to the lighter calibers due to available supply, transport (mostly bullock drawn) and nature of targets.

The operations of this force cannot be visualized properly, despite the semi-independent nature, without some conception of previous and concurrent events. While the Second Army was subject only to the authority of its commanding general and Bulgarian General Headquarters, its actions were, in effect, a vital portion of a much larger picture.

Our purpose, therefore, is to outline briefly in the following pages, the essential features of the general picture first, and then discuss in as much detail as the source material permits, the more specific features of this operation.

## SUMMARY OF THE GENERAL SITUATION

### HISTORICAL DATA

The mission of the Second Bulgarian Army and its zone of action in the Fall of 1915 were, as will be described below, intimately related from the national Bulgarian viewpoint with the results of the Balkan wars. A very brief discussion of these wars seems therefore to be the logical beginning of this study.

(2) Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece and Montenegro formed an alliance against Turkey which resulted in the 1st Balkan War (Oct. 1912 - May 1913). The great success of the Allies, measured both by rapidity of conquest and the comparative extent of territory captured, induced national feelings - particularly in Bulgaria and Serbia - of pride, greed and jealousy which were not conducive to a calm and judicial allocation of the fruits of war. The particular subject of dispute was the valley of the Vardar River which lay in what had been Turkish Macedonia. (n.b.) (3) While Russia attempted earnestly to avert further conflict, Austro-Hungary - covert foe of Serbia since the annexation of Bosnia by Austro-Hungary in 1908 - at this time lent her influence to Bulgaria. Serbia and Greece signed a treaty of alliance for ten years (June 1913) as a counter move. On the night of June 29, without previous declaration of war, the Bulgarians made an almost simultaneous attack

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(2) E. B. 14th Ed. Vol. 20, p. 347, et seq.

(3) Feyler, p. 93

on the Serbians and Greeks. The Serbian counter-offensive, combined with the attacks of Greece, Roumania and Turkey, resulted in the defeat of Bulgaria and the Treaty of Bucharest on August 10, 1913. By this, Serbia acquired all of Macedonia west of the Vardar and to the east the districts of Stip (Istib) and Kocana but Bulgaria retained possession of a dangerous salient at Strumnica (Strumica, Strumitza) which enabled her to threaten Serbia's only railway connection with the Aegean (to Salonica). This railroad runs within six miles of the Serbian-Bulgarian border at its nearest approach.

This situation continued until the opening of the World War.

#### GENERAL MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

It is desirable, at this point, to consider Serbia - the principal scene of operations of the Second Bulgarian Army - and her neighbors. Her geographical relationship is indicated in Figure 1.

(4) As a result of the Balkan Wars, Serbia nearly doubled her area and increased her population by about 50%. In 1914 Serbia had a population of about 4,500,000 people disposed over an area of about 32,000 square miles. As a measure of magnitude in a more familiar scale, it may be stated that Pennsylvania in the same year had an area of about 45,000 square miles with a population of about 8,000,000 people.

The major axis of Serbia extends north and south for approximately 260 miles, while its width in an east-west direction averages about 120 miles.

The terrain of the nation may be classified, as a whole, as mountainous. One-third of the country was forest land. Small land owners and their families formed 91% of

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Figure 1  
Geographical Relationship  
of Serbia to her  
Neighbors.

— Railroads.





Figure 2.  
General Topography.

From 14<sup>th</sup> Ed. E.B.



From:  
Der Weltkrieg 1914 - 1918. Neunter Band.



Figure 3.

the population. The industrial productivity, even in primary war materials, was low.

The roads (Fig. 3) and railroads (Figs. 1 and 2) in Serbia were such as to emphasize, in the operations of 1915, the extreme importance which lines of communication and supply may assume in both strategical and tactical operations. The most important railroad from the Serbian viewpoint, since it constituted the nation's route of supply, ran nearly due south from Belgrade, the capital on the Danube, to the port of Salonica in Greece on the Aegean Sea. From this central trunk there were several branches, all dead ended with one exception. This exceptional branch extended from Nish to Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. (5) Thus, from the viewpoint of the Central Powers, while it was desirable to eliminate Serbia as a threat to Austro-Hungary from the south and also isolate Russia, the German strategical objective was to be the railroad Belgrad-Nish-Sofia since it formed the link in the line from Germany to Turkey.

The roads in Serbia, all accounts agree, were scarce and uniformly wretched. Paved roads did not exist except in a few large centers of population. In wet weather the dirt roads rapidly became stationary rivers of mud. Even roads of this sort were extremely limited in number. (See Map 3) General Falkenhayn was to have cause to write (6) "All the armies were complaining bitterly of the great difficulty caused by lack of roads and by the condition during wet weather of such roads as there were." Again (7) "The topographical conditions compelled the pursuing armies simply to keep on the march along the few roads that were still available." And finally (8) "In the end, the (Austro-German) advance could only be maintained by the withdrawal

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- (5) Falk. 162; E.B. 14, 20, 354  
(6) Falk. 176  
(7) Falk. 179  
(8) Falk. 185



of half of each of the armies in the neighborhood of the railways and the handing over of their supply columns to the troops that remained on the march in order to enable them to continue."

#### WORLD WAR EVENTS LEADING TO BULGARIAN MOBILIZATION

(9) Serbia repulsed three Austrian attacks prior to January 1915. Active operations then ceased on this front for about eight months. (10) Negotiations were begun between the Germans and Bulgarians in July 1915 and a convention was signed 6 September. Bulgaria was to furnish four divisions (which were almost double those of the Germans in infantry strength) for coordinated action with the Austro-German forces; all to be under the supreme command of von Mackensen. In addition Bulgaria was to move into Serbian Macedonia with at least one other division. The Austro-German forces were scheduled to attack 6 October on the northern front; the Bulgarians on 11 October from the east.

#### CONCENTRATION OF THE SECOND BULGARIAN ARMY

The interest of Bulgaria in the Serbian Macedonia territory since the first Balkan War, has been indicated above. (11) Instead of assembling only the minimum of one division required by the convention with Germany, an army (so-called) was concentrated under the command of General Todorov along the southern half of the Serbia-Bulgaria border with its center at Kustendil.

(12) This Second Army was composed at first of the 7th Division, a unit called the Macedonian Legion which later became the 11th Division and a cavalry division. The 3d Division was added before the 11th became available and later the 5th Division. Still later there were other changes. The location and disposition of the Second Army on 14 Octo-

(9) E.B. 14-20; 352

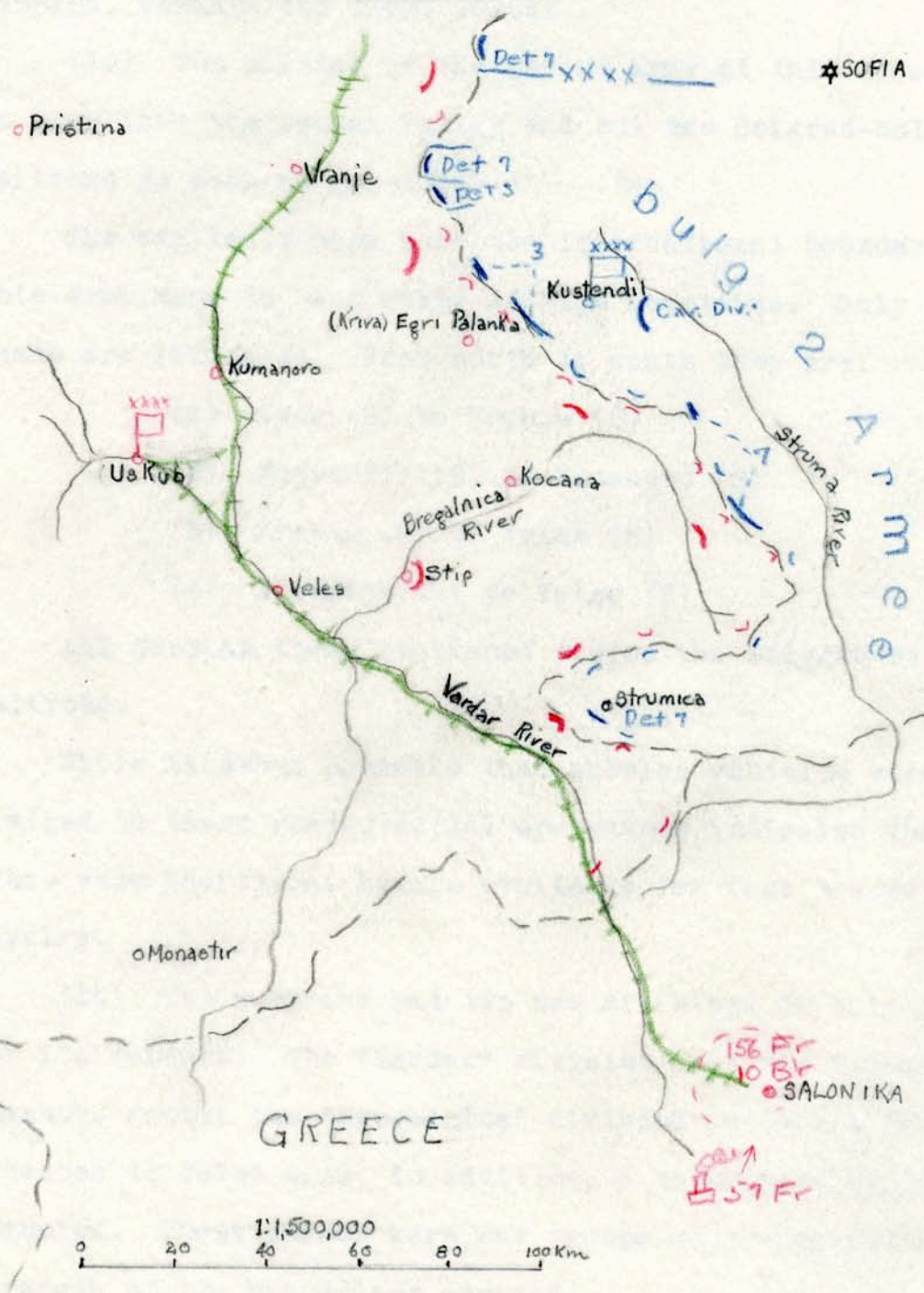
(10) Falk. 160-161

(11) Falk. 165; E.B. 12th Ed.; Feyler 93

(12) Feyler 93 Austrian official maps

Figure 4.

14 October 1915



ber, according to Austrian official sources, is shown on Map 4. (13) At this time the Austro-German forces had attacked along the Danube on schedule on 6 October and the First Bulgarian Army, two days behind schedule, advanced over a 170 Km front on the 13-14 October. The Second Army, not under von Mackensen's command, but with a coordinated mission, was ready to advance, using the 3d and 7th Divisions and the Cavalry Division.

#### MISSION, TERRAIN and ENEMY FORCES.

(14) The mission of the Second Army at this time was to move into the Vardar Valley and cut the Belgrad-Salonika railroad as soon as possible.

The available maps show the international boundary in this army zone to be a range of high mountains. Only four roads are indicated. From north to south they are:

- (1) Tron (B) to Vranje (S)
- (2) Kustendil (B) to Kumanovo (S)
- (3) Kresno (B) to Veles (S)
- (4) Strumica (B) to Veles (S)

All Serbian towns mentioned are on the Belgrad-Salonika railroad.

While it seems probable that wheeled vehicles were limited to these roads, actual operations indicated that there were additional trails available for foot troops and cavalry.

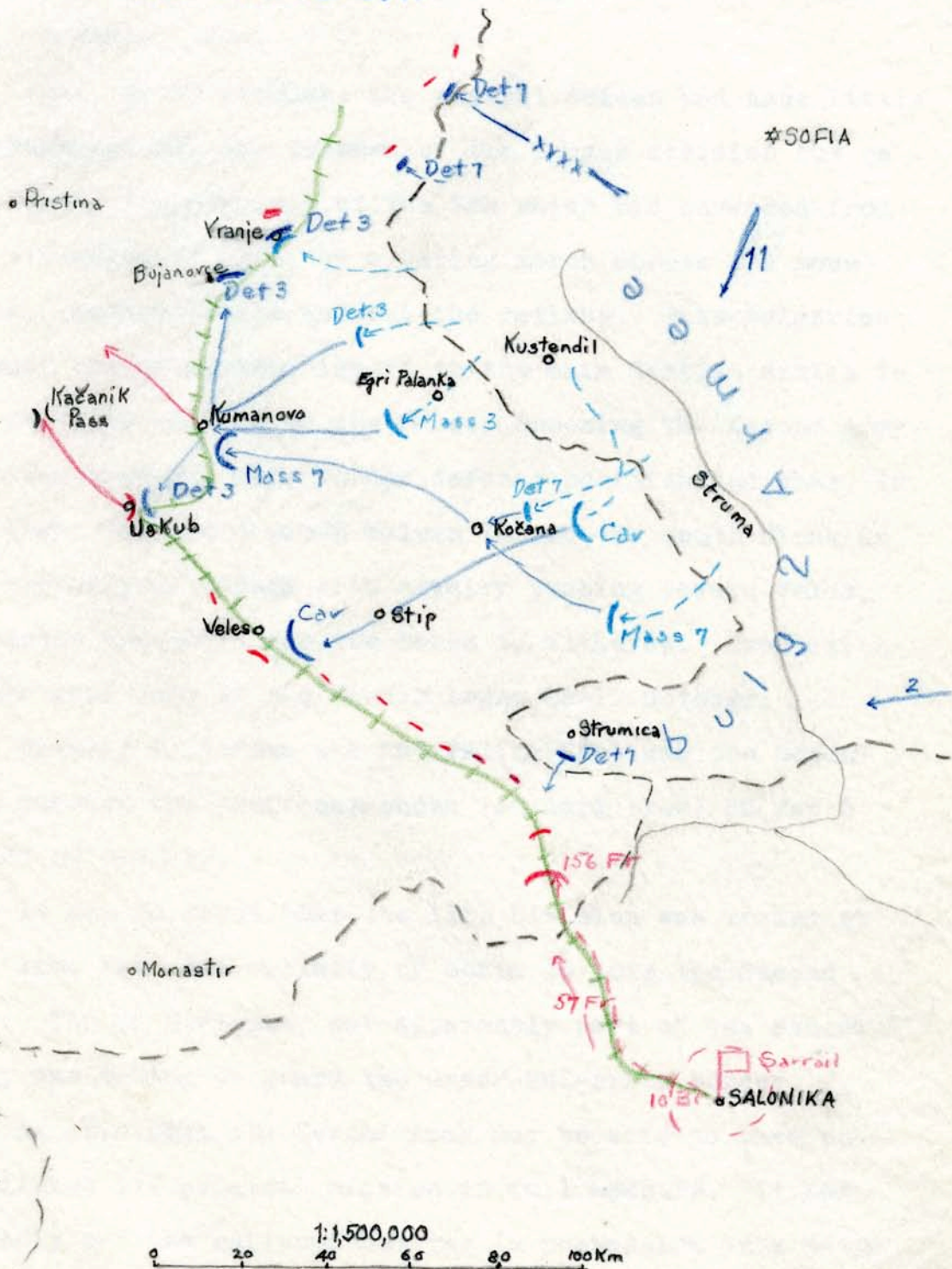
(15) The Serbians had two new divisions in this sector for its defense. The "Vardar" division held the Kustendil-Kumanovo route; the "Bregalnica" division protected the approaches to Veles with, in addition, a detachment opposite Strumica. These forces were raw troops about one-fourth the strength of the Bulgarians opposed.

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- (13) Feyler 83, 85, 86  
(14) Folk. 165  
(15) Feyler 93



17 October 1915

22 October 1915





## ADVANCE OF THE SECOND ARMY

The main body of the 3d Division was to advance on the Serbian position along the Kustendil-Kumanovo road while the main body of the 7th Division executed a wide envelopment of the south flank in the general direction Kočana-Kumanovo. Detachments of the 3d and 7th were to advance on Vranje, and protect the right flank. (See map 5, 17 October, 1915)

(16) By 16 October, the central column had made little progress against the defense of the Vardar division but on this date, the regiment of the 7th which had advanced from the direction of Tron, by a daring march across the mountains, reached Vranje and cut the railway. This Bulgarian success was of serious import to the main Serbian armies in the north as well as to the forces opposing the Second Army. It threatened the main Vardar defense position and when, in addition, Todorov's south column turned the south flank in the vicinity of Kočana with cavalry pushing toward Veles, it became necessary for the Serbs to withdraw. Evacuation of the area east of the Vardar began 18-19 October.

Closely following the retreating Serbians the Second Army reached the positions shown (in dark blue) on Map 5 on 22d of October.

It may be noted that the 11th Division was moving at this time from the vicinity of Sofia to join the Second Army. The 2d Division, not apparently part of the Second Army, was moving to guard the Greek-Bulgarian border.

At this date the Second Army may be said to have accomplished its original mission in full measure. It had not only cut the railroad but was in possession of a large part of it.

The advance of the First Bulgarian Army in the first

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(16) E. B.; Feyler 93



two weeks of its operations was limited to thirty miles, an average of two miles a day. Yet in one week, the success of the Second Army was such that it had driven the tip of its salient over fifty miles into Serbian territory which, at this latitude, was approximately two-thirds of Serbia's width. The base of the salient was about ninety miles and the opposing forces were in full retreat.

#### THE SECOND PHASE OF THE OPERATIONS

An abrupt change occurred in this seemingly bright picture at this time. It was induced by several causes, as follows:

(17) a. It was at this time that "all the armies were complaining bitterly of the great difficulties caused by the lack of roads and the terrible condition of those which existed."

(18) b. When the Bulgars entered Uskub (22 October) they saw on the high ground dominating the city, an enemy force which seemed large enough to observe. It was, in fact, the 13th Regiment (Serb). Instead of pursuing vigorously, uncertainty - and fear of exposing their line of communications - caused the Bulgars to halt to clear the situation. No offensive action was taken for two days. This delay gave the Serbians time to escape and organize a strong defense. Farther to the south, a Serbian counterattack even recaptured Veles from the Bulgar cavalry for the time being.

(19) c. The line Vranje-Kumanovo-Uskub is backed by a mountain range through which there is but one good pass, that of Kacanik, although it might be turned on the north in the vicinity of

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(17) Falk. 176  
(18) Feyler 107-108  
(19) Feyler 93 maps



Vranje where the elevations are much less. While an early and successful advance across this barrier to Pristina would have cut off the retreat of the main Serbian forces, (20) it was made additionally difficult by the arrival of Serbian reinforcements to protect their flank.

- (21) d. Finally, at this time, the French forces which landed at Salonika and which had been prevented from effective action by political considerations and lack of coordination, had advanced to the north on the Salonikan railway and were in a position to threaten Todorov's south flank.

(See map 5)

#### A NEW MISSION FOR THE SECOND ARMY.

(22) The main Serbian forces were now retreating on the whole front in the general direction of the plains of Kossova near Pristina. They offered no determined resistance except to the Second Bulgarian Army whose swift advance threatened to cut off their retreat to Albania. (23) Attempts to hasten the advance of the Second Army by sending portions of the First Army to its aid had no success. The roads and supply problem presented insuperable difficulties to all troop movements that could not be thoroughly worked out long beforehand.

(24) For this reason, at the request of the Germans, Bulgarian G.H.Q. gave the Second Army the new mission of opposing any irruption of the Serbians to the south in an attempt to join forces with the French and British.

It will be noted that this mission combined with the

- (20) Falk. 78-9  
(21) Feyler 95  
(22) Falk. 178  
(23) Falk. 179  
(24) Feyler 101



Figure 6.

29 October 1915

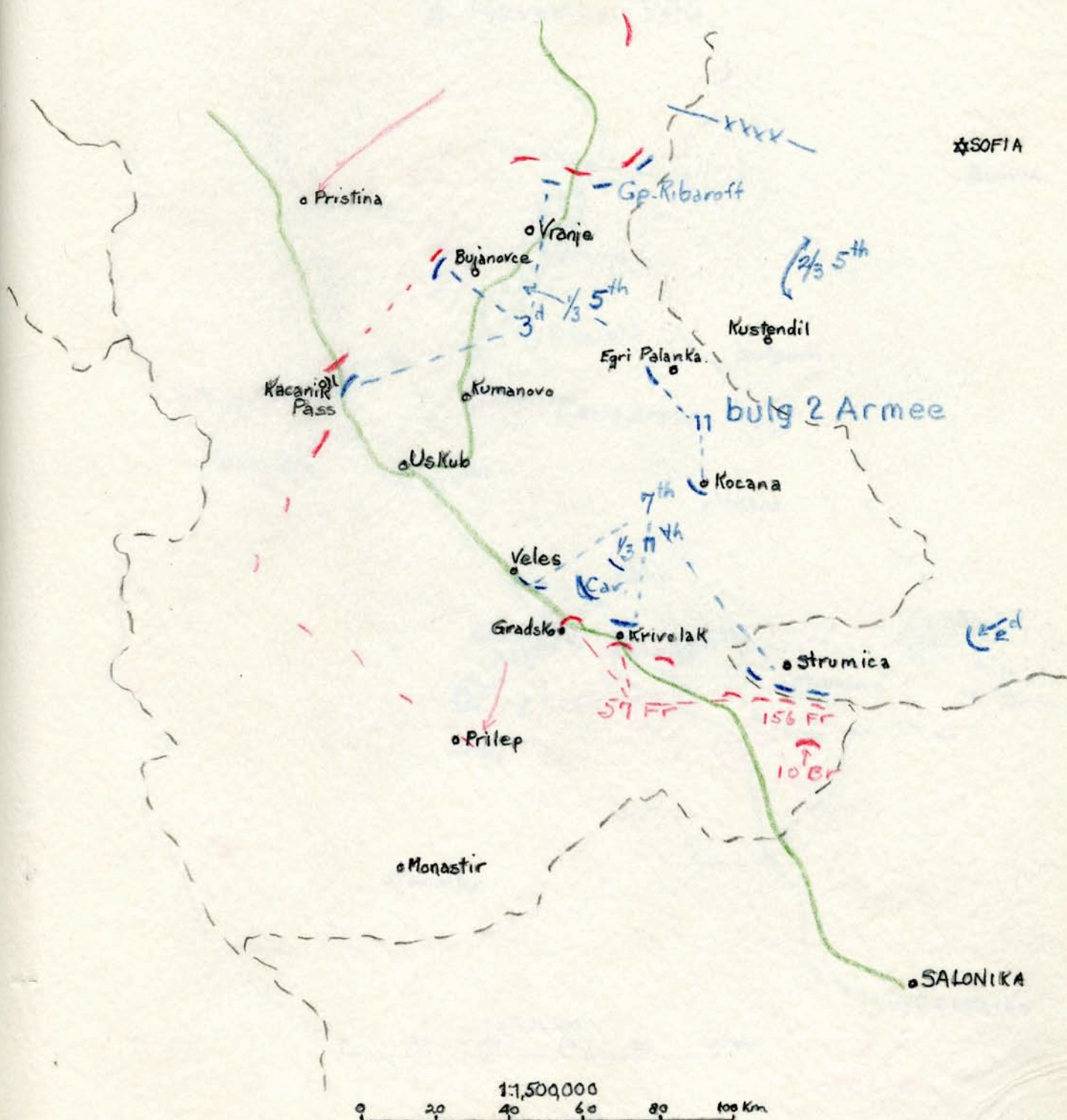




Figure 7.

11 November 1915





threat of the French advance in the south and the absence of any but insignificant enemy forces to the west, caused the Second Army to split to an ever increasing extent into two groups. The north group (Ribaroff) was charged with the main mission; the south group opposed the French.

Figure 6 shows the French farther advanced on this date than other accounts indicate. Feyler (97) states that Gradsko was not captured until 6 November.

No great changes occurred on the front of the Second Army to 11 November. See map 7. The French had taken Krivolac and Gradsko and reached their line of greatest advance. (25) The Bulgarians attacked and were repulsed but the French advance was stopped on 12 November on advices from France. (26) Ribaroff's group was having greater difficulties. The Serbians assembled the remnants of five divisions east of Pristina and assumed a violent offensive on 9 November which eventually drove the Bulgarians back to Vranje in one direction and to Kumanovo in the other. Figure 7 indicates this Serbian attack in its early stage. By the 15th Ribaroff's right was in extreme difficulties, but the arrival of part of the First Army from Lescovat on the left rear of the attacking Serbians, rescued Ribaroff's forces.

(27) This was the last Serbian effort except for a despairing attack at Ferizovic. By this date Ribaroff's front was farther advanced than it had been on the 9th. Pursuit toward Prizren resulted in many prisoners and the scattering of the Serbs. Other Serbian troops were pouring into Albania. The end was plainly visible. See Figure 8.

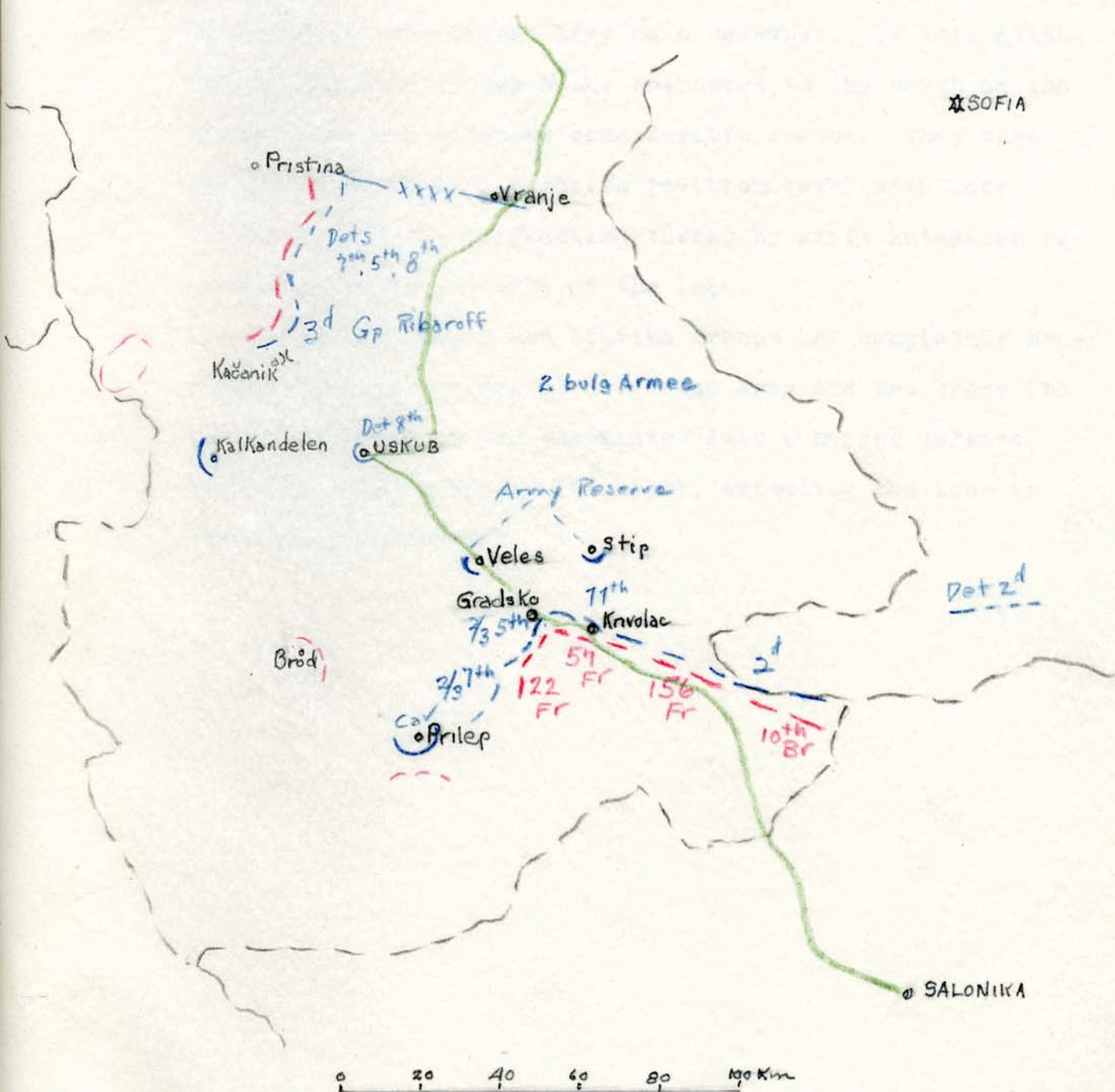
(28) The situation in the south remained about the same. (29) Bulgarian attacks had been successful in re-

(25) Feyler 97  
(26) E. B. 12th Ed.  
(27) Falk. 186

(28) Falk. 182  
(29) Feyler 95

Figure 8.

22 November 1915



capturing Gradsko and Krivolac and a new attack was to be launched on the 23 November.

Before this attack, the 122d Division withdrew and on further advices from France, the evacuation of the Allied position was begun.

(30) Acting on advice from German G.H.Q. to seize independently any opportunity that arose and on the news that a retirement was in progress, the Bulgarian G.H.Q. ordered an attack of the Second Army on 5 December. In this attack the Allies were thrown back, retreated to the south on the whole front and suffered considerable losses. They were unable to maintain a covering position level with Lake Doiran due to the outflanking threat by swift Bulgarian reinforcements to the east of the lake.

When the French and British troops had completely evacuated Serbia, the Second Bulgarian Army did not cross the border but settled for the winter into a border defense, with the First Army, on its right, extending the line to the Albanian frontier.

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(30) Falk. 187-188



## C R I T I Q U E

While it is felt that this research has not been developed to the point where a detailed critical analysis of the operations is justified - and consequently will not be attempted - it is believed that the foregoing exposition illustrates a number of major and minor principles of war.

Proceeding chronologically, in their consideration, they may be summarized as follows:

1. Morale, and the consequent chances of success, will be exceptionally high if the mission of the forces is consonant with national aspirations.

Illustration: National Bulgarian desire to avenge their defeat in the Second Balkan War and acquire the Vardar Valley.

2. Careful planning and thorough coordination by competent authority is a major factor in successful military effort.

(31) Illustration: (for) For three months before the beginning of the campaign, the Bulgarians had the advantage of the counsel of several score of officers of the German staff who worked out, at the ministry of war in Sofia, the whole plan of campaign.

(32) (against) The Allied command believed, (at least in effect) until Bulgaria declared war, that it would, at most, remain neutral; prevented an early and presumably effective attack by the Serbians; (33) procrastinated in an attack from Saloniki and lost an opportunity of some promise to deliver an important, if not decisive blow.

3. It is strategically a sound principle to strike the enemy line of communications in flank particularly if only one such line exists.

Illustration: The inability of Serbia to supply her

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(31) G. C. Smith, p. 38

(32) E. B. 13th Ed.

(33) M. H. 222

war needs from internal sources made her particularly vulnerable in communications. Her single line of rail supply was vital. Its severance alone would probably have caused her defeat.

4. It is equally a sound strategical principle to operate against the main enemy forces to cause their defeat whether this be by an attack in force or by an elimination of an essential element of their maintenance.

Illustration: Same as 3 above.

5. Surprise, in military operations may be of more value than force.

Illustration: The initial Serbian position was topographically so strong as to permit a successful defense by troops inferior in numbers and training provided they were not taken by surprise. The Bulgarian advance, from the vicinity of Tron, menaced their flank and rear - through surprise - and, combined with an envelopment of their right flank, caused the evacuation of an extremely strong position.

6. The rapidity and depth of advance will be dependent, in a large degree, upon the number of routes and their adequacy for supply purposes.

Illustration: The superior force of the Second Army could not be used effectively, except in surprise, owing to the limited routes of advance, and later the penetration was importantly influenced by the difficulties of supply over existing routes.

7. An enemy position may be threatened more dangerously by an attack on its flank or rear than by a strong frontal attack.

Illustration: In a small degree: By the envelopment of the north and south flanks of the original Serbian position - the Vardar Valley. In a large degree: By menacing the rear of the main Serbian forces, and the flank of the



Second Army by the French.

8. Again it seems that, irrespective of seemingly important special factors, the maximum depth of a penetration will be approximately half its base.

Illustration: The Second Army on 22 October and thereafter, with special modifications which included subsequent widening of the base.

9. The superior mobility of the cavalry was either (a) misused; or (b) was ineffective.

Illustration: Activity of 1st Cavalry Division as shown above. The student is inclined to the opinion that the cavalry was poorly handled by the army commander; and that with proper use would have been much more effective.

10. A retreating army, particularly when inferior in strength, training and morale, should be pursued vigorously and relentlessly in order to secure the fullest fruits of victory.

Illustration: (By failure). The escape of the main Serbian forces at Uskub; their opportunity to organize successive delaying positions; and the Bulgarian loss of opportunity to cut off the retreat of the main Serbian forces.

11. The value of properly timed counterattacks.

Illustrations: (1) The Serbian counterattack in the Kačanik Pass in the latter part of October. (2) The Serbian counterattack against the right of the Second Army in the middle of November. This latter almost amounted to a counteroffensive.

12. The influence of supply and communications upon reinforcements for desirable action.

Illustration: Despite the desirability, the Second Army could not be effectively reinforced to cut off the retreat of the main Serbian forces because such reinforcement required long and careful coordination of supply in this situation, due to the scarcity and poor condition of available roads.

13. The influence of strategical considerations upon military action.

Illustration: While slightly out of the scope of this research, it is of interest to note that the Germans had little interest in extending their gains beyond a line which secured the Orient railroad.

14. The influence of national pride and vengeance upon military operations.

Illustrations: The desire of Austria to annihilate Serbia to avenge her previous defeats and several years of ill feeling.

15. The influence of political factors on military operations.

Illustration: Bulgaria refrained from crossing the Greek border to defeat a retreating enemy in order not to antagonize Greece or to indulge in operations which would not contribute to the satisfaction of a national aspiration.



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